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Rauschenbusch's Regurgitations: Rob Bell's Promotion of a Realized Eschatology and
His Alignment with Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel Movement

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Abstract

Rob Bell, author of the book *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, is one of the lead voices in the new emergent conversation. In his book, Bell's ideas suggest a postmodern worldview for the modern day American church. Through this presupposition, Bell aligns himself with many of the liberal writers of the early nineteenth century, such as Walter Rauschenbusch of the Social Gospel movement. This arrangement has led to Bell's reworking of many core orthodox positions, but in particular, the doctrine of eschatology. He asserts a form of realized eschatology, similar to Rauschenbusch, which misrepresents the gospel, while elevating the authority of man's reasoning at the expense of that of Scripture.

Rauschenbusch's Regurgitations: Rob Bell's Promotion of a Realized Eschatology and His Alignment with Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel Movement

“As you know, the important thing is to understand what you're doing rather than to get the right answer,”¹ sang Tom Lehrer, in his satirical song, “New Math,” in which he criticizes new approaches that were being introduced to mathematics education. While his song served as a light-hearted criticism, it also applied to the postmodernist movement, as the journey toward truth is idolized over the actual truth. Postmodernism has gone so far as to assert that propositional truth is unknowable. Reaching its tentacles into philosophy, music, art, and literature, it was simply a matter of time before postmodernism would emerge within Christianity, having a voluble spokesman.

And emerged it has, in the form of a trendy, rock-star pastor oozing charisma that could challenge that of the King himself. However, unlike Elvis Presley, Rob Bell does not use his rock star persona to revolutionize the music landscape of American culture. Instead, Bell is “repainting” the ecumenical landscape and the way that the American Christian lives. Labeled by the *Chicago Sun Times* as the “next Billy Graham,”² Rob Bell uses his platform as a prolific writer and an excellent communicator to shape the up-and-coming Christian generation.

Yet, underneath his rock-star hype lies a theology born of postmodernism. This theology emphasizes a re-evaluation of the orthodox Christian faith and all of the doctrine that it instills. In rejection of absolute truths, Bell's postmodern journey through

1. Tom Lehrer, “Tom Lehrer- New Math Lyrics,” ST Lyrics, <http://www.stlyrics.com/songs/t/tomlehrer3903/newmath185502.html> (accessed February 6, 2010).

2. Debra Bendis, “Bell's Appeal,” *Christian Century* 126, no. 6 (March 24, 2009): page 22-25. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 6, 2010).

the Christian faith gives priority to human reasoning, while diminishing the authority of scripture. Without the Scriptures as an objective marker of truth, Bell uses any combination of philosophies, sciences, histories and sociologies to build a theology that is loosely formed around the orthodox Christian faith. Particularly, his re-evaluation of heaven and hell contends that both are present realities achievable here on earth. This conclusion aligns Bell with many of the radical liberals of the early twentieth century Walter Rauschenbusch in particular. Bell mirrors the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch, who also advocated an eschatology that associated the Kingdom of God with a present reality. But Bell takes this a step further by contending that hell, in addition to heaven, is present here and now. He advocates a theology that associates man's direct actions with the coming or going of the Kingdom of God. In doing so, Bell replicates the core weaknesses of Rauschenbusch's arguments, including the importation of Darwinian evolution into theology.

Introduction

Rob Holmes Bell, Jr. began his academic studies at Wheaton College, where he received a degree in psychology before taking his Masters of Divinity from Fuller Theological Seminary. He is the author of multiple books: *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, *Sex God*, *Drop Like Stars* and the NOOMA videos, which "may make him [be] to YouTube what Graham was to the arena."³ Bell's vast influence is demonstrated by his books, which have sold many tens of thousands of copies and his NOOMA videos that have sold 1.8 million copies.⁴ Before

3. David Van Biema, "The Hipper-Than-Thou Pastor," *Time*, December 06, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1692051,00.html> (accessed February 6, 2010).

4. Ibid.

his wide success as an author, he started out as an apprentice pastor at Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, under Ed Dobson. It was from this platform that Bell set out on a church plant that became later known as Mars Hill Bible Church.

Mars Hill Bible Church began as an experiment in church style to attract a wider range of non-traditional, audience members, and it now averages 11,000 weekly.⁵ This church sought to become a more organic, relevant and practical version of church life. In an interview on his church's structure, Bell states, "we're rediscovering Christianity as an eastern religion, as a way of life."⁶ In keeping with the sentiments of his book, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, the church attempts to interpret the Christian faith in a way that is current with our culture. According to the 2006 *Church Growth Today*, Mars Hill Bible church is the seventeenth most influential church in America, as compared to Thomas Road Baptist Church, which is twenty-seventh.⁷ This move to a relevant church has caused many of Bell's contemporaries to label him as a leading figure in the "emergent church," a designation that he denies on the basis of not accepting labels.

The Emergent Church and Its Implications

Emergent or not, it is clear from his wide ranging audience that Bell's assertions in theology and Christian living are not to be regarded as a voice in the desert. Instead, his voice is becoming well known among evangelical Christians, while he becomes the "central figure...for the way that evangelicals are likely to do church in the next twenty

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Kent Schaeffer, "The Church Report's 50 Most Influential Churches for 2006," Church Relevance, entry posted July 11, 2006, <http://churchrelevance.com/the-church-reports-50-most-influential-churches-for-2006/> (accessed February 8, 2010).

years.”⁸ Rather than crying out from the desert, his voice seems to be crying directly from “the heart of white, suburban evangelical Christianity.”⁹ Bell’s call for a *repainting* of Christian living and faith appeals to a bedraggled generation, which is shaken into cynicism based upon the perceived marriage of faith and politics. He appeals to “young adults...who are tired of politics being the center of faith”¹⁰ and are left behind trying to remove the shrapnel of the Religious Right and the Moral Majority.

Alternatively Bell is just one of many new voices who are seeking a form of Christianity that attempts to undo the marriage of faith and politics. The Emergent Church is trying to recover the Christian community presented in the New Testament Church, while engaging the culture and avoiding the consumerism found in the evangelical church.¹¹ Therefore, Bell has gathered a large audience of Christians who were raised in Christian homes and attended evangelical schools.¹² His following is not simply a disgruntled minority of the evangelical movement, but a growing number of young Christians who envision the same repainting of the Christian faith. This movement has “book sales [that] tower over their secular progressive counterparts in Amazon rankings; whose sermon podcasts reach thousands of listeners each week; and whose

8. John Leland, “Center Stage for a Pastor Where It’s Rock That Usually Rolls,” *New York Times*, July 8, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/08/us/08minister.html> (accessed February 6, 2010).

9. Zack Exley, “Preaching Revolution: A New Evangelical Movement offers lessons for the left,” *In These Times*, March 14, 2007, http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/3061/preaching_revolution/ (accessed February 6, 2010).

10. D., B, “Gen-Next preacher: Chatting with Rob Bell.” *Christian Century* 126, no. 6 (March 24, 2009): 23-24. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 6, 2010).

11. R. Albert Mohler, *The Disappearance of God: Dangerous Beliefs in the New Spiritual Openness* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2009), 78.

12. Bendis, *Bell’s Appeal*, 22-25.

messages, in one form or another, reach millions of churchgoers.”¹³ Whether via book sales, sermon podcasts, or videos, this new movement in Christianity is an amorphous one that is hard to track and to identify. Nonetheless, George Barna, known for studying trends within Christianity, has labeled this movement as “The Revolution” and has counted more than 20 million “Revolutionaries” in America.¹⁴

While it is a challenge to directly identify this movement, the characteristics that are shared amongst these revolutionaries are easily recognized. They have an increased concern with the social injustices in society, a postmodern philosophy, and a growing concern for helping the needy of society. Heather Zydek, editor for *Relevant* magazine, has characterized “the movement this way: ‘We want to get back to the roots of Christianity, which is about service to those in need, sacrifice, denial of self for others.... But for too long we’ve spread a gospel of suburbanism, of self-centeredness, of capitalism, of political conservatism....’”¹⁵ This campaign is not noted for its organization structures. Instead it is characterized by its spontaneity and nondescript nature with an emphasis on social justice. Not limited to a small minority of followers of Bell, this movement has gained other popular voices, such as Tony Campolo, a professor of sociology at Eastern University; Brian McLaren, an unofficial head of the emergent church; and Shane Claiborne, whose popular book, *Irresistible Revolution*, has made him the unofficial head of the Neo-monastic movement. Among this increasing number of *revolutionaries*, “Bell and Claiborne are [simply] two of the better-known young voices

13. Exley, *Preaching Revolution*.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

of a broad, explicitly nonviolent, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist theology that is surging at the heart of white, suburban, evangelical Christianity.”¹⁶ With the emergence of this movement, Bell’s book, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, provides a welcome base of theology behind these *revolutionary* voices.

Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith

Quickly becoming a college campus hit, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, has not come onto the scene without some harsh criticisms. The leading objection to Bell’s book has to do with a denial of absolute truth, as he tries to affirm a postmodern worldview within Christianity. It begins with the first chapter, which is based upon a painting of Elvis that Bell finds inside his house. He notes how this painting of Elvis is simply the artist’s idea and conception of what he thought Elvis looked like. This analogy is applied to Christianity as Bell assigns Christians the same task as the artist. Through reinterpretation of the Scriptures, Christians identify with the artist by *repainting* the life of Christ within today’s cultural context. The author is not calling for an evaluation and change of the current ecclesiastical tools and methods, but something far more fundamental, an evaluation of “beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, salvation, [and] the future.”¹⁷ Christian faith is said to have previously “provided [a] meaning...but it is [now] no longer relevant. It doesn’t fit. It’s outdated. It doesn’t have anything to say to the world [we] live in everyday.”¹⁸ After this opening thesis, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the*

16. Ibid.

17. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 12.

18. Ibid., 13.

Christian Faith takes us on a postmodern journey as Bell gives his interpretation of Christianity.

In his version of Christianity, Bell redefines the traditional view of heaven and hell; heaven and hell have an embodiment on the earth. In an interview with the *Wittenburg Door*, he claims that “[h]eaven and [h]ell are present realities extending into the future.”¹⁹ Heaven or hell comes to earth based upon the underlying spiritual condition of the individual. Consequently, heaven or hell becomes a state determined by one’s closeness to God. Elucidating this view, Bell concludes that when life is “in harmony with God’s intentions for us, the life of heaven is more and more present in our lives. Heaven comes to earth.”²⁰ This idea is strongly reminiscent of Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel movement in which, the Kingdom of God was presented as an ethical kingdom that could be accomplished here on earth.²¹ Rauschenbusch claimed the primary characteristic of Christianity is to transform “...life on earth into the harmony of heaven.”²² Consequently, Bell’s alteration in the traditional doctrine of heaven and hell amounts to little more than a return to Rauschenbusch’s realized eschatology with a postmodern spin.

19. Flip Blaney, “Rob Bell on Sex, God, and Sex Gods,” *The Wittenburg Door*, November 14, 2007, <http://www.wittenburgdoor.com/interview/rob-bell> (accessed February 6, 2010).

20. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 148.

21. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 332.

22. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 65.

Postmodernism and Its Implications

By his espousal of a postmodern worldview, Bell aligns himself with the American liberals of the early nineteenth century. This alignment begins with his claim about the nature of truth in *Velvet Elvis*. He presents a formless view of truth, defining it as completely unknowable and mysterious. Developing this perspective, Bell quotes Sean Penn, who states “[w]hen everything gets answered, it’s fake. The mystery is the truth.”²³ The aforementioned esoteric nature of truth is asserted throughout the teachings of Bell and becomes the basis for his interpretation of Scripture. He rejects the traditional attempt to define doctrine on the ground that truth is an unknowable thing. Instead doctrine becomes a work in progress constantly revealing itself in new ways. Therefore, it becomes impossible to maintain any faith in doctrine because of the inability to define truth about God or Scriptures. As Bell puts it, Christian faith “is not so much that... [it] has a lot of paradoxes. It’s that it *is* a lot of paradoxes. And we cannot resolve a paradox. We have to let it be what it is.”²⁴ The *mysterious nature of truth*, then, is a commodity to be embraced and simply becomes a part of Christianity.

Having developed this notion of truth as something unknowable and indefinable, Bell identifies how it is to be applied to the Bible. He compares the fundamentalist’s conception of doctrine to bricks in a wall. Each doctrine becomes a brick that is rigid and inflexible. Bell points out that inflexibility is one of the weaknesses of this wall, stating that as “you begin to rethink or discuss even one brick, the whole thing is in

23. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 33.

24. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 34.

danger....[R]emove one, and the whole wall wobbles.”²⁵ He claims that the weakness of this approach then, is its inability to add new discoveries to the *bricks* it is built upon. In creating this analogy, Bell points out an underlying flaw of the evangelical church.

Plagued by the rationalist movements of the past decades, the modern day evangelical church has the tendency to turn theology into an empirical method. Correspondingly, God is placed into a “box” that is itself incased in a wall of data and reason.

Bell’s answer to this problem goes to the other extreme, in which true doctrine is unknowable, impermanent and therefore unattainable. To justify his approach, Bell returns to his brick analogy. He creates a hypothetical situation in which one of the *bricks* of Christian doctrine comes under scrutiny:

What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry’s tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births?²⁶

Bell does not state that this scenario is by any means plausible; nevertheless, from it he surmises the irrelevancy of traditional doctrine to Christian faith. He asserts that were the aforementioned situation to occur, it should not affect nor change an individual’s belief in the Christian faith. Instead of being like “bricks,” he compares theology and doctrine to “springs” on a trampoline that have room to stretch, grow and move. While stretching or moving, the springs on a trampoline still hold their shape and allow an individual to *jump* or grow closer to God. If this speculative situation were to obtain, then on “brick layer” view, the believer would find his wall crumbling down and he would be unable to

25. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 26.

26. *Ibid.*

continue following Christ. Bell contends that the “brick layers” faith was not very strong if it crumbled under the scrutiny of one brick. In essence, he postulates that doctrine should be more like trampoline springs: malleable and indefinite.

This portrayal of theology, as either “Brickianity”²⁷ or a “trampoline,”²⁸ becomes the basis for Bell to advocate the mysterious nature of truth. He asserts that a part of “brickianity” is believing and understanding all of the axioms and propositions before an individual belief can be accepted. In lieu of “brickianity”, the trampoline view of theology promotes the inability of the individual to know every detail. By and of itself, an individual can jump on flexible, indefinite premises and still know God; the individual embraces the mysterious nature of truth. The ultimate goal, then, is not to ground one’s faith on solid points, doctrines, or “bricks,” but to embrace mystery.

At the heart of this analysis is a denial of the importance of the infallibility of Scriptures. If *Larry* was proven to be Jesus’ father beyond a shadow of a doubt, it would make the Scriptures untrustworthy. One aspect of theology having been falsified the whole faith would fall apart, thereby revealing that it was not that strong.²⁹ Yet this analysis does not question some minute, obscure doctrine, but a major teaching of Scripture. In his criticism of Rob Bell, Mark Driscoll references J. Gresham Machen who states, “[I]f the Bible is regarded as being wrong in what it says about the birth of Christ,

27. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 28.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, 27.

then obviously the authority of the Bible in any high sense, is gone.”³⁰ The problem with accepting the *Larry* hypothesis is that it requires acceptance of the fallibility of scripture.

Instead of accepting these adverse consequences for faith when a single “brick” or doctrine comes under attack, Bell would have us change the interpretation of *virgin*. That is, in the aforementioned circumstance, “being ‘born of a virgin’ also referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse.”³¹ Biblical interpretation is then viewed through the prism of modern day philosophies, sciences, sociology, etc. On the one hand, Jesus might, in fact, have been born of a virgin, in the modern day sense, and Bell would accept this outcome. But should science prove this wrong, it is acceptable to change the way the Bible is interpreted. Francis Schaeffer warns against this line of thinking, stating that “the Bible is made to say only that which echoes the surrounding culture at our moment of history.”³² This then makes human reason and science the conclusive interpreters of scripture.

Truth, by its very nature is consistent. “[N]ew truth is stated everyday...that in no sense negates or changes old truth.”³³ Truth stands regardless of what new things are discovered. If it was sixty-two degrees on a Saturday that does not negate that it was fifty-three degrees on Friday. If new truths could prove that old *truths* were not true, then the old *truths* were not true in the first place. If the Scriptures are truly the Word of God,

30. Mark Driscoll, “Navigating the Emergent Church Highway,” *Christian Research Journey* 31, no. 4 (2008): <http://www.equip.org/articles/navigating-the-emerging-church-highway> (accessed February 6, 2010).

31. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 26.

32. Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian View of the Bible as Truth*, vol. 2 (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1982), 147.

33. David Dewitt, “Velvet Elvis Review,” Relational Concept, <http://www.relationalconcepts.org/long%20topics/Velvet%20Elvis%20Review.pdf> (accessed February 6, 2010).

then they will stand regardless of what new human discoveries are made. Therefore, if one affirms the Bible as truth, then any modern day discoveries will build upon the Scriptures instead of negating or changing them. When these discoveries become the lens through which the Scriptures are viewed, instead of the other way around, this leads to the Bible getting “bent to the culture instead of the Bible judging our society and culture.”³⁴

If such malleability is ascribed to truth and the Scriptures, then the Bible begins to lose its place as the Word of God. If new truths can negate old truths, such as Bell proposes, the Bible ceases to be an objective marker of truth.³⁵ Putting one’s faith in a book with no claim to truth becomes unjustifiable. Taking Bell’s hypothesis a step further, suppose evidence is found to disprove the resurrection. Then, based on Bell’s conception it would be acceptable to discard the resurrection. But, if the Bible has no claim to truth, then Christianity as a faith has no more purpose or truth to it than any other religion. Instead of rejecting this changing idea of truth, Bell endorses it. He wholeheartedly embraces unknowability and mystery and contends that is the duty of every Christian.³⁶ Bell’s position on truth determines his position on Scripture, which he says is “‘ human product,’rather than the product of divine fiat’ [T]he Bible is still in the center...but it’s a different kind of center. We want to embrace mystery rather than

34. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, 147.

35. Dewitt, *Velvet Elvis Review*.

36. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 34.

conquer it.”³⁷ But by seizing upon mystery, Bell also has accommodated a dubious version of truth and a faith based on a questionable philosophy.

While he still maintains the importance of the Scripture, like the earlier American liberals, Bell believes that human reason is on par with Scripture. Liberals advocated a “rejection of religious beliefs based on authority alone.”³⁸ Alternatively, they worked to combine human reason and experiences with theology and “desire[d] to adapt religious ideas to modern cultures and modes of thinking.”³⁹ In much the same way, Bell does the identical thing: he takes the deliverances of reason as a mandate for a postmodern repainting of Christianity with its attendant reinterpretation of Scripture.

Reinterpretation is the premise that echoes throughout Bell’s book. The Christian faith must be *repainted* for every generation. To solidify this conviction, Bell turns to the rabbis before Jesus. He points out the communal aspect of rabbinic interpretation as the rabbis would debate the meaning and way to live out the Scriptures. This idea of communal interpretation is read into the church today and the New Testament writings. At first glance this seems to be a strong and logical *modus operandi*, as it is important to be able to apply the Bible to our situation. But Bell takes this a step further by claiming this act of interpretation and decision-making becomes determinative of what is and is not Scripture.

This becomes one of the troublesome *springs* on Bell’s trampoline, inasmuch as the “repainting” of Scripture takes it well beyond the biblical portrait. His insistence that

37. Jeff Robinson, “Engaged by the Culture: Michigan Megachurch Goes Egalitarian,” The Resurgence, entry posted, 2004, http://theresurgence.com/jeff_robinson_2004_engaged_by_the_culture (accessed February 6, 2010).

38. Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), s.v. “Theological Liberalism.”

39. Ibid.

human decision-making and reason are authoritative becomes the ground on which *sola scriptura* is questioned. He states,

This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that “Scripture alone” is our guide....The problem is that we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is. So when I affirm the Bible as God’s Word, in the same breath I have to affirm that when those people voted, God was somehow present, guiding them to do what they did. When people say that all we need is the Bible, it is simply not true.⁴⁰

In this excerpt, Bell becomes yet another artist painting on the liberals’ canvas. His emphasis on the decision-making process of those involved with the canon is the same tactic used by earlier American liberals. The liberals denied the infallibility of the Scripture on the premise that human reason should determine what scripture is and says. Therefore, they created a view of canonicity in which “the Bible is the work of writers who were limited by their times, [and as such] it is neither supernatural nor an infallible record of divine revelation and thus does not possess absolute authority.”⁴¹ Bell echoes this basic premise, not by directly denying *sola scriptura*, but overemphasizing the creative role of interpretation.

In pressing for such communal interpretation, Bell adduces Acts fifteen and the decision of the Jerusalem council.⁴² He emphasizes verse twenty-eight which states “[i]t seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements” (NIV). The fact that the word *seemed* is used becomes Bell’s rallying call for a repainting of Christian faith. He interprets the word *seemed* as a decision by the apostles to not lay down a firm foundational truth. Instead, he claims that

40. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 68-69.

41. Elwell, *American Liberalism*

42. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 57-58.

this word indicates a divine, creative journey that the apostles are engaging in. He argues that the language of this chapter has an “inherent assumption that they are on a journey. There is more ahead....They aren’t done painting.”⁴³ In a single stroke, Bell uses the Acts 15:28 passage as the proof text for the need of Christians to engage in a creative relational journey. As the apostles were in the process of deciding how the Gentiles should be accepted into the Christian faith, they never left any room for a permanent foundational truth. Instead, with their *seems*, “they leave room to admit that they may not have nailed it perfectly the first time.”⁴⁴ Bell claims that the divine revelation set forth in the Bible was not complete, but was the beginning of a journey. The Scriptures have no true authority. Instead they are simply the ramblings of men trying to understand how to live out the Christian life. This conclusion becomes the basis, from which Bell concludes that all of Christianity is an interpretative journey of mankind.

Bell’s elevation of human reason leads to the Scripture being interpreted in a novel manner. He does not advocate analysis of the minute details of the actual text to see what it means, but rather a sweeping overhaul of all the core doctrines of Christianity. In particular, the doctrine of eschatology is changed based upon new interpretations of scripture. Rauschenbusch viewed eschatological subjects in the Bible through a social justice lens. This in turn led to his negative view of prophetic revelation. Similarly, Bell reinterprets Jesus’ use of the word *Gehenna*, which results in an overall change in eschatology.

Rauschenbusch imported the tenets of social justice into the confines of scripture, resulting in his non-literal approach to the Bible. He viewed the book of Revelation in a

43. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 58.

44. *Ibid.*

negative manner, concluding that it was a product of the Jewish Christian Church, therefore not truly worthy of canonicity.⁴⁵ Emphasizing this point, he states “[James and Revelation] were saved from the deluge of oblivion because they were admitted into the ark of the Canon; and they were thus admitted only because they bore the names of apostles, and then only reluctantly.”⁴⁶ The absence of a positive view of Revelation changed the way that he interpreted end-time prophecy; Rauschenbusch believed Revelation was an allegory of human oppression in society.

In doing so, he identified two types of eschatology in the Bible: a Jewish eschatology and a Church eschatology. He stated that the “demonology and satanology [which] pervaded Jewish eschatology after the exile, were as we have pointed out, in part of a religious expression of social and political hatred and despair.”⁴⁷ All the Jewish writings regarding eschatology had to do with seeking out freedom from their political oppressors. On the other hand, the church eschatology was created amid the political backdrop of the Roman Empire. Rauschenbusch believed that the eschatology of the church was in response to the strength and vastness of the Roman Empire and its oppression of Christians. Such oppression created a deep-seated root of hopelessness and despair in the Church, in which “the escape into immortality was the only way to freedom left to all.”⁴⁸ By such historical contextualization, Rauschenbusch rejected the validity of the Bible’s eschatology for today. He stated that the “church under persecution, wept and

45. Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 98.

46. Ibid.

47. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922) 247.
<http://books.google.com/books?id=yASJAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcoer&dq=A+Theology+for+the+Social+Gospel#v=onepage&q=false> (accessed November 19, 2009)

48. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 213

prayed our eschatology into existence.”⁴⁹ But now this is not current with the modern day culture and is not applicable. Rauschenbusch then asks the question, if the *primitive* church had the ability to shape their doctrine, does not the “social consciousnesses of our age, speaking through the social gospel, also have a right to be heard in the shaping of eschatology?”⁵⁰ He concludes that because historical, biblical eschatology was created by social causes, modern theology should be created in the same way. He creates a new version of the Kingdom of God that was revealing itself in his own day, as Christians worked to eliminate social injustices.

Bell’s reinterpretation of Scripture likewise leads to his divergence from the orthodox doctrine of heaven and hell. But instead of importing social justice into the Kingdom of God, he partially misinterprets the Greek word *Gehenna* to arrive at his conclusion. He states,

The word *hell* is found fourteen times in the Bible, twelve of those occurrences being found in the teachings of Jesus. The word *hell* in English is the word *Gehenna* in Greek. *Gehenna* is a reference to the Valley of Hinnom, a ravine on the south side of the city of Jerusalem. This valley was the site over the years of many violent and horrible deaths, and it came to be viewed as cursed. By Jesus’ day it had become the town dump. So when Jesus uses *Gehenna*, it is loaded with meaning and visual power- everybody knew what he was talking about. The translator is faced with a decision about how to translate the word. If he or she uses the word *hell*, later readers might miss the fact that Jesus is talking about a present reality. If the word *gehenna* is used, readers might understand the present geographical meaning of the word but miss the bigger implications.⁵¹

In presenting the historical aspects of *Gehenna*, Bell has developed a good representation of the derivation of the word. In 2 Kings 23:10, the Valley of Hinnom was a place where the Israelites, in their wickedness, sacrificed to the pagan god, Molech. Later, it became a

49. Ibid.

50. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 215

51. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 58.

dump after Josiah desecrated the pagan altars in the valley in order to remove the wickedness from the land. Bell presents this historical context behind the Valley of Hinnom, but he misses out on the eschatological symbolism that the early century Jew would have picked up on. *Gehenna* became a cursed place, one upon which God's wrath was poured out. By using the word *Gehenna*, Jesus was not only bringing to mind the literal Valley of Hinnom, but also the Jewish eschatological connotations.

The Jews of Jesus' time viewed Gehenna as an analogy for the judgment and the potential destruction of the wicked individual. The Valley of Hinnom was also known as *Topheth* likely because of the Hebrew word *Toph*, which means drums. When the children were sacrificed to Moloch, drums were played in order to silence their dying screams. Throughout Talmudic literature, evidence is given of a deeper eschatological meaning of *Topheth*, viz. that indicated by *Gehenna*. The Gemara uses Isaiah 30:33, to support the conclusion that Topheth was created in the beginning.⁵² It was clear then, that the early century Jew believed *Gehenna* existed before and beyond the history of the Valley of Hinnom. Rabbi Yisroel Reisman elucidates this point, claiming the date for *Gehenna's* creation was the second day of creation.⁵³ Thus *Gehenna* had an older and deeper eschatological meaning than simply the "town dump," as Bell compares it to.

The actual place of judgment that God has prepared for the wicked was not the geographical Valley of Hinnom, as Bell suggests. Instead, *Gehenna* was believed to be under the earth. In the Talmud, there was four entrances into *Gehenna*, "one in the

52. b. Erub. 19a3.

53. Ibid.

desert, one in the sea and one in Jerusalem,”⁵⁴ while the fourth one later added was between two palm trees inside of the Valley.⁵⁵ According to the “Mishnah (Succah, 29b),”⁵⁶ these palm trees have “smoke rise(ing) from between them.”⁵⁷ The four locations of *Gehenna* served, to the Jewish mind, as the entrance to hell; the two palm trees served as particular symbolic markers to *Gehenna*. The *Marharsha* explains that palm trees or date trees were sought out for their sweet fruit.⁵⁸ Before the advent of modern day bakeries and ice cream shops, dates were the prime fix for a sweet tooth. The *Marharsha* goes on to explain that “one date tree represent[ed] the normal enjoyment of the sweets of this world....[while] two date trees represent overindulgence and it is this overindulgence in the pleasures of this world that lead a person to hell.”⁵⁹ The Valley of Hinnom was the closest thing on earth that the Jews could use to understand the concept of hell.

Symbolism aside, eschatological *Gehenna* existed beyond its physical location of the Valley of Ben Hinnom. While the actual location of eschatological *Gehenna* was debated, rabbis generally placed *Gehenna* either “in the bowels of the earth (‘Eruv. 19a); [or] in the heavens or beyond the mountains of darkness.”⁶⁰ Wherever its location,

54. b. Eruv. 19a2.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Avi Lazerson, “The Entrance to Hell,” *The Jewish Magazine*, January 2010, http://www.jewishmag.com/140mag/gate_to_hell/gate_to_hell.htm (accessed February 6, 2010).

59. Ibid.

60. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), s.v. “Geihinnom.”

rabbinical literature shows that the eschatological *Gehenna* served as a place of divine judgment, not geographically bound by the Valley of Ben Hinnom.

Regarding the judgment of the wicked, R' Shimon Ben Lakish observed that “the wicked, even at the entrance to Gehinnom, do not repent.”⁶¹ In this passage, he continues to argue that the wicked will not repent of their sins even after they have “entered the next world ... and they stand at the gates of *gehinnom* and witness the dire consequences of their crimes.”⁶² From early rabbinical literature, then it is clear that the Jews considered *Gehinnom* as a place of judgment, specifically in the afterlife. This portrayal of *Gehinnom* became even further nuanced as the rabbis delineated a different layer of judgment based upon one’s sins. Therefore, “when a man sins in a perfunctory way...he is punished to a degree.... [and when] the very same act is reckoned as a *deeper* sin—...the corresponding punishment is a *deepening* of Gehinnom.” (R’ Yeruchom Levoitz, Daas Chachmah U’Mussar 5).⁶³

As *Gehenna* grew in depth, the individual was thrown into one of seven layers depending on his sins. These layers had “seven names: Sheol, Annihilation, Well of Destruction, Pit of Turbulent Waters, Mire, Shadow of Death and the Underworld”⁶⁴ which corresponded to the sin that an individual had committed. *Gehinnom* and *Topheth* were considered blanket destinations for those committing general sins punishable in the previous layers.⁶⁵ They came from the Hebrew root of the words, *gei* (valley) and *hinnom*

61. b. Erub. 19a1

62. s/b Ibid., 8n.

63. s/b Ibid., 4n.

64. b. Erub. 19a3

65. s/b Ibid., 33n.

(immorality), whereas *Topheth* is similar to the Hebrew word for seduced.⁶⁶ The Talmud recognized Gehenna as colorful imagery used to represent the abode in which the wicked were judged. As such, “in later Jewish thought it became an image of the judgment of the wicked by fire, darkness and gnashing of teeth.”⁶⁷

Bell’s representation of *Gehenna* as a place of present destruction acknowledges the turbulent conditions of the Valley of Ben Hinnom, viz. *Gehenna*, but it ignores the eschatological symbolism that Jews would have placed on it. He states, “When Jesus uses *gehenna*, it is loaded with meaning and visual power--everybody knew what he was talking about,”⁶⁸ in reference to the destruction that is present in the Valley of Ben Hinnom. The Jews of Jesus’ time would have acknowledged this, but would have taken it a step further, acknowledging a physical abode in the afterlife where God’s judgment is poured out. But Bell does not acknowledge this eschatological connection behind *Gehenna*; instead he binds *Gehenna* to a geographical location at a current time. This then becomes the building blocks behind Bell’s description of hell, in which any destructive situation becomes a “hell on earth.”

Bell begins by defining hell as “a way, a place, a realm absent of how God desires things to be.”⁶⁹ When read through the evangelical lens, this at first comes off as an innocent redefinition of hell. Many evangelicals will agree that the “place of judgment”, viz. hell, is a place to which individuals go outside of what God desires. Bell takes this a

66. Ibid.

67. Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit and Tremper Longmann III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), s.v. “Valley.”

68. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 58.

69. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 147.

step further by elaborating what he means by “absent of how God desires things to be”:
“famine, debt, oppression, loneliness, despair, death, slaughter....poverty, injustice,
suffering-... [which] are all hells on earth.”⁷⁰ His hell stands on precarious ground, then,
because he exchanges the final, eternal judgment of God for weakened, fleshly
circumstances. By labeling these situations instances of “hell on earth,” he creates
difficulties for our interpretation of the Scriptures.

Paul makes it clear in 2 Timothy 3:12 that all Christians will suffer persecution
when they attempt to live godly lives. This, then poses the question, do Christians enter a
“realm absent of how God desires things to be” by practicing godliness and suffering
persecution? Or another situational controversy brought about by this logical extreme, is
the cross. Jesus consciously acknowledged and allowed the suffering he went through
before his death. But because of the Father’s will, He allowed Himself to be crucified.
This stands in stark contradiction to Bell’s conclusion that Jesus commanded Christian to
oppose hell on earth (poverty, injustice, and suffering) to the best of their ability.⁷¹ Instead
of avoiding or opposing death and suffering, Jesus embraced it. Therefore Jesus
contradicted God’s desire by suffering and dying on the cross. While Bell clearly does
not articulate this view in *Velvet Elvis*, this is the logical extreme and danger of taking
this view of hell, assuming that everything that entails suffering, or is painful or hard, is
not how God’s wants things to be.

After his reexamination of the word *Gehenna*, Bell’s ultimate conclusion
presently reveals itself. From his misinterpretation of the Jewish understanding of

70. Ibid., 148.

71. Ibid.

Gehenna, he concludes, “For Jesus, heaven and hell were present realities. Ways of living we can enter into here and now.”⁷² This becomes the central point of Bell’s eschatological shift from the traditional, orthodox view of heaven and hell, to an experiential, mystical, semi-preterist view of heaven and hell. This view, colored with a stroke of Darwinism, has Bell swimming up the same river as Walter Rauschenbusch.

Walter Rauschenbusch

In a similar manner to Bell, Walter Rauschenbusch’s theology came as a reaction to the pre-millennialist view. During the late 1800s, America went through an economic reorientation at the birth of the industrialization. As a result of this revolution, there was a change from homemade goods to mass production by the assembly line. Yet this factory lifestyle gave rise to many social concerns, such as long working hours, poor living conditions and the sweat shop phenomenon. Seeing these living conditions and the perceived lack of concern from the American premillennialist, Rauschenbusch developed a reactionary theology that caused him to be one of the fathers of the Social Gospel. The social gospel emphasized the power of the gospel to change humanity’s condition on earth. In particular, it emphasized social justice in regards to poverty, violence and human welfare.

While the Social Gospel movement became the champion of social justice, it brought about a change in Christian thought on the Kingdom of God. The image of a future Kingdom of God was displaced by one of a present reality. In this movement “the kingdom of God was not an idealized life in heaven but a reality which could be

72. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 147.

accomplished on earth.”⁷³ While Rauschenbusch’s purpose for the social gospel movement was admirable, in his zeal for social justice he departed from the traditional doctrine of eschatology, embracing a view that emphasized man as a higher, better being than what is in accordance with the Bible.

Although the Social Gospel movement and writings of Walter Rauschenbusch were decades before Bell, Bell’s presentation of a “heaven on earth concept” is strikingly similar to the Social Gospel movement. He simply exemplifies the common trend of history to repeat itself. His application of postmodernism has led him toward the same position as the early twentieth century American liberal movement. But what is particularly interesting is the manner in which Rauschenbusch and Bell work to arrive at their conclusion. Both of them share a philosophy that has a weakened view of scripture and, at the same time, an elevated view of mankind. But, more importantly, both Bell and Rauschenbusch add the lens of evolution to the glasses through which they view theology. These features have led to the sharp criticisms that both of these writers have received.

Rauschenbusch put a strong emphasis on the gospel message being transformative of society as a whole instead of effecting individual salvation. Rauschenbusch rejected any emphasis on individual salvation, stating that “it is not a matter of saving human atoms but of saving the social organism.”⁷⁴ This line of thinking reflects many of the movements that were beginning to rise during Rauschenbusch’s era, movements that attempted to overthrow the existing government and replace it with one that redistributed

73. McDannell, *Heaven*, 332.

74. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 54.

economic welfare amongst everyone. According to Tony Campolo, while these new social orders reflected similar thinking to Rauschenbusch, he rejected them based upon their “belief that it would come through a violent overthrow of the present socioeconomic order... [such as] the kind of violence evident in the Bolshevik Revolution.”⁷⁵ Instead, Rauschenbusch believed this socio-economic reorganization would come about from the gradual manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth.

This shift toward a socio-economic restructuring was the foundation for Rauschenbusch’s eschatology as he advocated a concept of a social sin. In order for this Kingdom to be brought about, Rauschenbusch believed there would have to be a disregard of individualism. In its place, the body of Christ would deal with its own social sins, which in turn would trickle down and remedy individual sin. Campolo confirms this saying change would be brought about when a “person relinquished their individualism and embraced a community spirit [which would] according to Rauschenbusch, [make them] become a force for social change.”⁷⁶ Rauschenbusch placed a strong emphasis on these societal sins, believing them to be the greatest evil of mankind. He went even as far as to claim that Jesus’ purpose of atonement on the cross was not so much for individual sin, but for public, corporate sins. This view is stated in *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, where he writes, “Jesus did not in any real sense bear the sin of some ancient Briton who beat up his wife in B.C. 56....But he did in a very real sense bear the weight of the public sins of organized society, and they in turn are causally connected with all private sins.”⁷⁷

75. Ibid., 76.

76. Ibid., 77.

77. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 247.

Although he did not deny the moral unrighteousness of private sin, he swept it underneath the table, so to speak, whereas rectifying public sin became the foundation of Jesus' ministry. It is against this backdrop of social sin that Rauschenbusch's eschatology is developed, one that deals with public sin.

Throughout his eschatology, it is clear that Rauschenbusch strongly disagreed with the premillennialist view held by many during his time. Instead, Rauschenbusch's view of the coming of the Kingdom of God aligned itself more with a realized eschatological view. He postulated that "as [Christians] assimilated the spirit of Christ and lived out his ethics, the Kingdom of God would break loose in the world."⁷⁸ Rauschenbusch comes off negatively toward the premillennialist viewpoint, which he claimed limited the true effectiveness of the gospel. Instead of a gospel message proclaiming the salvation of men and imminent return of Christ, he believed in a seeping, evolutionistic viewpoint of the Kingdom of God.

Rauschenbusch's negative view of pre-millennialism is based upon his observation of fallible Christians. Rauschenbusch supposes that they have given up their *duty* of social reform on the basis of an imminent rapture. The premillennialist is not concerned with seeing the society around him reformed, but is more concerned with living as content as possible while waiting for the rapture. In an article in "*The Examiner*," Rauschenbusch states, "I have yet to see proof that those who believe in the imminence of Christ's coming are indifferent to the security of real estate titles....and other things that involve a long look ahead."⁷⁹ This focus of Christians on the other world

78. Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*, 54.

79. Dores Sharpe, *Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), 115.

beyond, heaven or hell, puts them out of touch with the present, imminent reality of earth. He uses observation to then build a reactionary, this-worldly eschatology.

In a similar turn of events, Bell's writings represent a reactionary pendulum swing. Bell, too observes the evangelical movement and its ostensible disconnect with the marginalized of society, and uses this as a platform to develop, like Rauschenbusch, a reactionary theology. Bell labels premillennialism as a "left behind theology,"⁸⁰ warning that this is "an 'evacuation theology' [and that it] is lethal to believe that one can lie apart from the world in some kind of 'spiritual neverland.'"⁸¹ As Rauschenbusch did, Bell characterizes the American premillennialist as ignoring the concerns of society, while waiting for the second coming of Christ. And like Rauschenbusch, his realized Kingdom of God works to avoid the aforementioned *escapist* characteristics that he attributes to the premillennialist. Bell continues down this road stating, "the evacuation theology that says, 'figure out the ticket, say the right prayer, get the right formula, and then we'll get somewhere else' is lethal to Jesus who endlessly speaks of the renewal of all things."⁸² It is this characterization of premillennialism that Bell uses to justify his attempt to discard the orthodox view of heaven and hell.

Yet, this characterization of premillennialism is an overgeneralization at best. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote against this generalization arguing that "the ethical rigor of the early church was maintained through the hope of the second coming of Christ and the

80. Bendis, *Bell's Appeal*

81. Bendis, *Bell's Appeal*

82. Mark, Galli, "The Giant Story." *Christianity Today* 53, no. 4 (April 2009): 34-36. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 7, 2010).

establishment of his Kingdom.”⁸³ The establishment of the Kingdom of God was not a reason for the premillennialist to sit around in wait. Instead, it was a spur that drove the early church toward action. Niebuhr asserts, in contrast to Bell and Rauschenbusch, the lost belief in the second coming leads to Christian apathy. He notes that when the Christian hope of the second coming was lowered, the “church [was] forced to come to terms.... [with] the immediate necessities of life [and] made unnecessary compromises.”⁸⁴ Without the hope of a second coming, the church lost its focus and push for outreach. It was when the ability of man became the eschatological hope for the future that man was led to despair as his inability became clear. This leads to the degradation of Christian ethics, Niebuhr noted, as man focuses on simply surviving his present reality with nothing to look forward to.

But instead of leading to apathy, as Bell and Rauschenbusch contend, the imminent second coming of Christ, spurs Christians onward to action. While these men were right in their association of pre-millennialists with a negative outlook on mankind, they were wrong to assume that all pre-millennialists are apathetic. In fact, the opposite was true, as many pre-millennialists “did not act as though they believed the world was beyond saving.”⁸⁵ Instead, they viewed this negative decline of man’s spiritual condition as a reason for them to further the gospel. This assurance of Christ’s ultimate triumph became a great motivator for Christians, such as “D.L. Moody [who] ‘felt like working

83. Hans Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, trans. Louise Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956), 101.

84. *Ibid.*

85. Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 66.

three times as hard' after becoming a pre-millennialist."⁸⁶ Others, such as Robert Speer who served as the "secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions from 1891 to 1937"⁸⁷ supported premillennialism optimistically, stating how "premillennialism not only kept Christians upright... [but] it also prompted them to maximum effort in anticipation of the Lord's return."⁸⁸ The premillennialist view necessitated urgency for the gospel to be spread. Rauschenbusch and Bell's criticism of a disconnect in the church and its willingness to reach out to the community is equivalent to the proverbial "throwing out the baby with the bath water." They threw out the doctrine of premillennialism in favor of a view that necessitates man himself establishing the Kingdom of heaven on earth.

Darwinian Evolution

One of the inherent weaknesses of the Social Gospel's view of eschatology is the underlying lens through which Rauschenbusch viewed the Bible. During the period that he wrote, Darwinian evolution became the lens through which all economic, sociological, religious, and governmental ideas were filtered. This led to the rising support of many of the enlightenment, socialist organizations, which believed that with human progress, a perfect governmental arrangement could arise. These socialist groups called for political reorganization where ownership would be transferred to the collective body.

Rauschenbusch endorsed these socialistic tendencies, incorporating them into his theology and calling "for a social order characterized by justice, collective ownership of most property, democracy in the organization of industry, and a much more equal

86. Ibid., 67.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

distribution of goods.”⁸⁹ It is apparent that Rauschenbusch was seeing history through this lens of Darwinism in formulating his views of the coming Kingdom of God. When asked, “he admitted that his conception of the kingdom represented an effort to Christianize the Darwinistic evolution.”⁹⁰ This inclusion of Darwinian evolution led to the main weakness of Rauschenbusch’s argument for the Kingdom of God.

In the same manner that Darwinian evolution has influenced the viewpoint of Rauschenbusch, so has Bell’s influences, which suggest a flirtatious relationship between theology and evolution. In a sermon to the Southeastern Theological Seminary, Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, (not to be confused with Rob Bell’s Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan) claimed that Bell is a supporter of trajectory hermeneutics.⁹¹ Driscoll criticizes trajectory hermeneutics, in which the Bible does not literally teach certain things, but instead “sets in the course of motion a trajectory or direction that over time would evolve into a doctrine that seems to contradict the Bible, but ultimately is the logical outcome of the direction in which the Bible sets the culture.”⁹² Through trajectory hermeneutics, Bell subjects the scriptures to a form of cultural relativism. The Bible stands in a position in which the culture determines whether or not the scriptures are relevant or applicable to the culture.

In support of his claim, Driscoll cites the switch in Rob Bell’s church toward an egalitarian position on female leadership. Driscoll argues that Bell used the book “*Slaves*,

89. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 988.

90. Ibid.

91. Papa Giorgio, “Mark Driscoll Critiques Rob Bell and Brian McLaren,” Video Row, entry posted March 7, 2009, <http://videorow.blogspot.com/2009/03/mark-driscoll-critiques-rob-bell-and.html> (accessed February 7, 2010).

92. Ibid.

Women and Homosexuals,” by William Webb, to defend his shift to egalitarianism.⁹³ In this book, Webb tries to merge evolution with theology by making the interpretation of the Bible an evolutionary process. Using trajectory hermeneutics, Webb claims that the progression into modern day culture has created an ethics system which is better than the ethics “frozen in time” in the Bible.⁹⁴ This directly damages Bell’s hermeneutical approach to Scripture leading to his unstable outcomes, yet he retains this book on his recommended reading list on his church’s website.⁹⁵

Webb’s own trajectory hermeneutics exemplifies the flaw of bringing an evolutionary worldview into the interpretation of Scripture. It removes Scripture as the object of absolute authority, while mankind’s reason and experiences are used to determine what is and is not true. Driscoll labels such trajectory hermeneutics as “academic arrogance.”⁹⁶ By proposing that mankind has moved beyond the Bible through evolution, it assumes that mankind is greater than it truly is. Modern man is placed on a pedestal, having moved beyond biblical mandates. At the same time, the authority of the Scripture is further diminished as it claimed that God has moved beyond Scripture leaving behind His own revelation. As Driscoll goes on to state, it is the height of arrogance to assume that “we are more enlightened, or our culture is more enlightened, than Paul or Jesus.”⁹⁷

93. Ibid.

94. William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), page 32.

95. “Rob Bell’s Recommend Reading/Resources,” Mars Hill, <http://www.marshill.org/about/rob/recommendedResources.php> (accessed February 8, 2010).

96. Giogorio, *Mark Driscoll Critiques Rob Bell and Brian McLaren*

97. Ibid.

Webb is one example of Bell's evolutionary influences, while another is Ken Wilber. In one of his endnotes in *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, Bell tells us, "[F]or a mind-blowing introduction to emergence theory and divine creativity, set aside three months and read Ken Wilber's *A Brief History of Everything*."⁹⁸ This book continues down the road of viewing society and theology through an evolutionary lens. In an October 18, 2008 sermon entitled "Beware the Dogs," Bell states that if "Don Beck, Claire Graves, Ken Wilber and you look at child development, you begin to see certain patterns that connect. Now, you can take this biblical pattern and you can actually see a larger trend."⁹⁹ In this sermon, Bell makes mention of the pattern of society suggested by Ken Wilber, calling it a biblical pattern. This pattern comes from the "spiral school"¹⁰⁰ of thought, which is the "bring[ing] together all of mankind by turning them from egocentric (self-centeredness) to global-centric (world-centeredness)."¹⁰¹ Throughout "A Theory of Everything," Wilber describes a *spiral* move of society as it progressively moves forward toward its final culmination in a global-centric view of mankind. There are many steps along this path of human consciousness, such as the recognition of the tribal impulses. Evaluating the human consciousness, Wilber suggests that humans are "evolving through nine phases of human consciousness"¹⁰² whereas theism or "Christianity is level four of

98. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 192.

99. Ken Silva, "Ken Wilber: Integral Theory means everybody's right Rob Bell," Apprising Ministries, entry posted November 22, 2008, <http://apprising.org/2008/11/22/ken-wilber-integral-theory-means-everybodys-right/> (accessed February 7, 2010).

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid.

102. Giogorio, *Mark Driscoll criticizes Rob Bell and Brian McLaren*

an evolutionary standard.”¹⁰³ This fourth stage of human consciousness, theism, is then simply nothing but a lower stage of humanity. But as humankind advances, it will “evolve beyond more primitive ways of thinking, [viz.] religion.”¹⁰⁴

By propagating the views of Ken Wilber, Bell superimposes the evolutionary viewpoint onto Scripture. This leads the way to the position that Bell holds on the Kingdom of God, where instead of a final judgment followed by the creation of a new heaven and earth, heaven gradually materialize on earth. This state of perfection would come about only as mankind advances in its progression and is able to accomplish its goal of bringing heaven to earth. Advancing this point, Bell states, “[T]he goal isn’t escaping this world but making this world the kind of place God can come to. And God is remaking us into the kind of people who can do this kind of work.”¹⁰⁵ Bell proclaims that God is changing mankind in order that humanity can create a new heaven on earth. Clearly, this comes from evolutionary concepts superimposed onto the biblical conception of the Kingdom of God.

Ultimately, when the Darwinist conception of evolution is applied to the Kingdom of God, a utopian view of humankind is introduced which differs greatly from the biblical standpoint, wherein man is inherently sinful. This view depends on the ability of humankind to progressively achieve the utopian man. Yet, this is inconsistent with the Bible’s portrait of man as completely and utterly depraved. In Matthew 24:4-14, Jesus creates a picture of the end times. This imagery is full of Christian suffering and persecution, with rumors of wars, while there is an overall moral degradation as society

103. Ibid.

104. Ibid.

105. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 150.

grows in wickedness. This contrasts starkly with Rauschenbusch's portrait of a progressively Christian society growing into the ultimate perfection of the evolutionary man, Jesus Christ. Bell's concept also contradicts with the Bible's portrayal of man.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian following Rauschenbusch, became known for his pronounced criticism of Rauschenbusch. Niebuhr wrote during the Great Depression and world wars, a period in which there was a great disillusionment with the Social Gospel and much of the liberal Christian theology that had preceded it. The world wars woke up many Christians as they began to realize that an evolutionary viewpoint of humankind achieving the Kingdom of God was not likely. According to Werner Jeanrond, these experiences "led the neo-orthodox theologians to conclude that the evolutionary optimism of liberal theologies was unjustified and misrepresented the gospel."¹⁰⁶ Instead, the world wars revealed the depth of human depravity and the unlikelihood of a progression of humankind toward moral and social order. In fact, they showed the opposite: the advancement of man toward ever greater moral depravity.

The problem with liberal Christianity, according to Niebuhr was that the "kingdom of God was translated to mean exactly that ideal society which modern culture hoped to realize through the evolutionary process."¹⁰⁷ The Social Gospel movement helped lead to a redefinition of the Kingdom of God, as "the exercise of moral life in society."¹⁰⁸ In reality, the Kingdom of God was the coming fruition of the covenant

106. Joseph Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot Lane, eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology* 3rd ed. (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1989), s.v. "Neo-Orthodoxy." 713.

107. Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall, *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York: Macmillian Company, 1956), 63.

108. Clayton, Sullivan, *Rethinking Realized Eschatology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988), 62.

promised in the Old Testament. Jesus was not the example of an evolutionary man, as the Social Gospel believers proclaimed, but “was the fulfillment of the covenant promise made to the fathers.”¹⁰⁹ The Social Gospel’s evolutionary ideal created an idealism that led to its eventual criticism.

Niebuhr quickly pointed out the problem with American liberalism was that it created optimism in humanity that was unjustifiable, given the Bible’s teaching of the depravity of mankind and the problem of sin. Niebuhr expounded upon the true nature of sin, arguing that sin is “a contingent defect in the soul of each man.”¹¹⁰ This sin defect, inherent in every man, is ingrained in all of humanity from the day of the fall. Mankind’s propensity to sin runs counter to the optimistic ideals of a liberal evolution toward the kingdom of God. Through man’s freedom, he chooses to sin.¹¹¹ It is by his free choice that man consistently chooses to go outside of the moral law established by God. The present world, according to Niebuhr, “was destined to be evil by the fall of man.”¹¹² Bell and Rauschenbusch seem to have overlooked the depravity of man in their zeal to apply modern-day philosophy to their theology. Acknowledging this depravity, Niebuhr asserts that “man’s hope of building the kingdom of God by his own powers becomes impossible.”¹¹³ In offering this critical analysis, Niebuhr made it clear that the Kingdom

109. Sinclair Ferguson, ed., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1988), s.v. “Kingdom of God.”

110. Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 128.

111. Hofman, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 128.

112. Hofman, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 58.

113. *Ibid.*, 128.

of God was simply not possible by the human means that Rauschenbusch and Bell proposed.

Niebuhr disagreed with the evolutionary component that Bell, Rauschenbusch and other American liberal writers had propagated; the inability of mankind to forgo sin drew him to the conclusion that mankind required the direct assistance of God. Drawing this conclusion, he states, “the hope is not in...man’s involvement in shaping his destiny. The hope is in God’s triumph at the end of history.”¹¹⁴ The World Wars made it dramatically clear that society’s progression was not toward the evolutionary perfection, but toward chaos. Therefore the Kingdom of God could not be dependent upon mankind’s actions but God.

Bell insists that the Kingdom of God will be ushered into the earth based upon human actions. In addition, his scope of eschatology also includes hell, which can be spread on earth, as well. As such, it becomes the job of the Christian “to resist hell coming to earth.”¹¹⁵ While developing this point, he begins to insinuate a works based form of faith, although in his tour, *The Gods Aren’t Angry*, he took pains to make it clear that it is salvation by faith alone. But upon reading *Velvet Elvis*, his insights into heaven and hell lead the reader to believe that works too are necessary for salvation.

Bell begins with the parable in Matthew 5 in which Jesus evaluates the kind of people who will live with him eternally. In this parable, the kinds of people that end up making it into the Kingdom of God are those that helped the needy. Bell concludes his summary of the parable by stating, “Jesus measures their eternal standings in terms of not

114. Ronald Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politician* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 237.

115. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 148.

what they said or believed but how they lived, specifically in regard to the hell around them.”¹¹⁶ Now, this phrase is covered in a mystique of ambiguity because it could lead the reader to either of two conclusions. On one side, Bell’s conclusion leads to the belief that actions determine one’s entrance into the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, Bell may have had James in mind when he wrote this passage, leading to the conclusion that works merely indicate faith.

Either way, Bell continues this works dialogue further, stating, “The judge then condemns a group of people because they didn’t take care of the needy...in their midst. They chose hell instead of heaven, and God gives them what they wanted.”¹¹⁷ This dialogue leads Bell onto dangerous ground as he concludes that judgment is based upon an individual’s actions in social justice. In a manner similar to the Social Gospel movement, Bell’s analysis of the Mathew 25 parable over-emphasizes the social concern of humanity. This leads readers to believe that correcting social injustice will lead to righteousness from God. He follows this conclusion with an analysis of Luke 16:19-31, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The author breathes social justice into this parable, too, concluding that the rich man was condemned on the basis that he was stingy.¹¹⁸ In an interview, he further explains his conclusion, stating that Jesus “does not use the word [hell] with people who are not believers...it is a warning to religious people that they are in the danger of hell because of their indifference to the suffering of the

116. Ibid.

117. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 147.

118. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 149.

world.”¹¹⁹ This insertion of social justice into the text turns the focus of Jesus’ parables and his talk about the Kingdom of God into a merely ethical kingdom.

Abandoning the orthodox view of the Kingdom of God, the “predominant liberal view was that the Kingdom of which Jesus spoke was a present ethical kingdom.”¹²⁰ This, on the whole, contradicts much of Jesus’ teachings on the Kingdom of God. Jesus did not portray the Kingdom of God as an ethical kingdom here on earth, but as a supernatural, divine action by God. John Nolland analyzes the Kingdom of God, pointing toward Isaiah, in which he states “the most convincing background for understanding Jesus’ talk of the Kingdom of God is supplied by the expectation in Isaiah (Isaiah 24:23, 52:7) of a future intervention of God to establish his rule.”¹²¹ Instead, the liberal theologians and Social Gospel writers interpret Jesus’ references to the Kingdom, such as in the Beatitudes, as rules of conduct for society. While Jesus’ commands were for society, the inability of these commands to be kept demonstrates the true spiritual condition of mankind. These “ethical demands...are incapable of fulfillment in the present existence of man...and their final fulfillment is possible only when God transmutes the present chaos...into its final unity.”¹²² Jesus’ commands do not give evidence of a social conduct for bringing in the Kingdom of God. Instead, according to Herman Ridderbos, “Jesus’ ethical commands (including the Sermon on the Mount) were interim rules in anticipation of the imminent kingdom, not rules of conduct for all

119. Blaney, *Rob Bell on sex, God and Sex Gods*.

120. Matthew Allen, “The Kingdom in Matthew | Bible.org; NET Bible, Bible Study.” Bible.org

121. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text (New International Greek Testament Commentary)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 176.

122. Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 100.

times.”¹²³ Alternatively, this interpretation of the Kingdom of God as an ethical kingdom, instead of an eschatological hope, becomes the incorrect presupposition, that Bell uses to push for social justice. Instead of a future hope, heaven or hell becomes a production of the evolutionary process of man.

With the evolutionary view of the Kingdom of God, Jesus begins to lose his place of divinity. While Rauschenbusch and the rest of the Social Gospel writers did not deny the divinity of Jesus, they did limit it. Instead of being the Messiah, Jesus became the example of the completed work of evolution. He was emblemized as the perfect conception of man, a status that was within the ability of man to achieve. Jesus became the “true mythical symbol of both the possibilities and the limits of the human, [He] became the man of Galilee, symbol of human goodness and human possibilities without suggestion of the limits of the human and the temporal—in short, without suggestion of transcendence.”¹²⁴ In essence, as humankind strives to be like the ultimate “symbol of human goodness,”¹²⁵ it will usher in the Kingdom of God. This then becomes a denial of the sovereignty of God, by claiming the need for humankind’s actions to bring in the Kingdom of God.

On the contrary, the Bible portrays the “Kingdom of God’ coming into the world not by human actions, but by the direct intervention of God as he establishes his Kingdom on earth. God’s establishment of his Kingdom on earth is shown in Daniel 2:44, which states “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that

123. Allen, “The Kingdom in Matthew”

124. Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall, Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought (New York: Macmillan Company, 1956), 63.

125. Ibid.

will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people.” It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end. This is a direct divine act of God, done without the hand of humankind, which stands in stark contrast to Rauschenbusch’s and Bell’s theology. This viewpoint of Daniel 2:44 shows how humankind’s “problems of politics and history can only be resolved by a supernatural intervention that inaugurates a new kingdom,”¹²⁶ not an evolutionary kingdom. The Kingdom of God is presented as being created by the direct hand of God, not the evolutionary progression as Rauschenbusch and Bell propose.

Conclusion

Rob Bell’s wide popularity has made him somewhat of a celebrity to the up and coming Christian generation. On the back cover of *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, Bell challenges readers, “Test it. Probe it. Do that to this book. Don’t swallow it uncritically.”¹²⁷ The popularity of Bell’s writing has demonstrated the need to do just that, to test and probe his works. In doing so, it becomes clear that he is promoting a postmodern philosophy that he has insinuated into biblical Christianity. This conflation of postmodernism with Christianity aligns Bell with the American liberals of the early nineteen hundreds. Joining the liberals, Bell elevates the authority of human reason and uses human philosophies to reinterpret scripture. Particularly, he reinterprets Jesus’ use of the word *Gehenna*, portraying it as a representation of a present, earthly hell. Along with reinterpreting hell, Bell also reinterprets the coming Kingdom of God in a manner reminiscent the ideas of Walter Rauschenbusch.

126. John Goldingay, *World Biblical Commentary* Vol. 30, Daniel (Waco: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 60.

127. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, blurb.

In doing so, Bell misrepresents the Gospel message and, in turn, also skews God's judgment. His ambiguous presentation of his doctrine makes it challenging to define his definitive stance on issues. Yet, his conclusion concerning the parables of Jesus, in light of his eschatological doctrine, suggests that believers are reconciled with God based upon works. This weakness in doctrine comes from his presentation of Christianity as an ethical challenge along the lines of Walter Rauschenbusch and the other American liberals. Like them, Bell makes use of evolution as one of the philosophies by which he interprets Scripture. In doing so, he emphasizes the ability of man to evolve into the symbol of perfection, Jesus Christ, and to be able to bring in the Kingdom of God by himself. Bell dismisses any eschatologically conceived judgment on the basis that humans' innate ability can bring heaven to earth.

Because of his enormous of popularity, Bell's voice is not one to be taken lightly. Many college students are talking about the writings and ideas presented by Bell through his many media. Yet, they do not realize the postmodern philosophy, which permeates Bell's writings. Bell's ambiguity leads to his theological acceptance by the casual evangelical reader. But a deeper understanding of the worldview from which Bell writes shows the dangers of the theology that he proposes.

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